

PHILOSOPHY 15: THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE (T/R 9:30-10:50, WLH 2204)

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Introduction. This course is an introduction to “epistemology,” or the study of knowledge. Why study knowledge? One reason is that it’s often crucially important to be able to tell the difference between “knowing” and other states of judgement like opinions, beliefs, and hunches. A scientist’s conclusions, for example, have to be more than just unsupported opinions. In the law courts, we suppose that judgements are made based on knowledge of the facts, not on mere hunches or beliefs. Engineers must know that a bridge will be structurally sound before it’s even built. In these contexts, we can ask, “do you really know that?” And in order to answer this question we need to know more about where knowledge comes from and what it means to really know something. Aside from such practical issues, humans have long wondered whether we can be sure that the world is as it appears to us. On dark melancholic nights we may even wonder how we can know that we exist at all—that we’re not simply a computer simulation, or living in the “Matrix.” Even if we can set these worries aside, we should still wonder whether and when we can ever trust our own judgement, let alone the judgement of others.

I have chosen to approach your study of epistemology by looking at a few central topics and issues within the study of knowledge, rather than offering a survey of historical approaches to epistemology. We will, however, use a classic historical text to structure our discussion. People’s views about knowledge have changed a lot over the last 2600 years, but many of the fundamental questions of epistemology are very old indeed. Throughout the course, we will be looking back at an ancient text, Plato’s *Theaetetus*, which asks the question “what is knowledge” directly. We’ll see that Plato’s concerns about knowledge are actually pretty intuitive and familiar to us even today. Using this text as a launching point, we’ll consider some classic and contemporary views on skepticism, where knowledge comes from, what it’s like, and why it’s valuable.

Texts.

Plato, *Theaetetus*. Translated by John McDowell. There are a lot of different copies of this dialogue out there. You may already own one. I really want you to use this translation, if it’s at all possible. For one thing, I think it’s one of the best, and is far more readable and modern-sounding than other available translations. Also, it’s got *excellent* notes in it that will be a big help to you as you read it.

Michael Huemer, *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*. Available at the bookstore or online. ISBN: 978-0-415-25921-7. You will need it starting in week 2. The readings I’ve picked from this book are generally sections of classical texts or contemporary philosophical articles. Reading these texts can be difficult, which is why it’s important that you go slow, reread, take notes as you read, and go to the discussion sections. Also, this book has some excellent introductions, both to the book generally and to the sections of the book, which can be a big help if you’re having trouble with a particular reading.

Electronic Reserves. There are a couple of readings which will be posted on e-reserves.

Course Requirements.

- (1) Section participation 15%
- (2) Short Paper (on epistemological skepticism) 15%
- (3) Tutorial Paper 20%
- (4) Tutorial Examination 20%
- (5) Final Examination 30%

Assignments Explained

- (1) **Section participation.** This will be evaluated by your TAs.
- (2) **Short paper.** For this first assignment, I will ask you to write a short paper of **no more than 600 words** on a prompt handed out in class. The topic of the paper will be epistemological skepticism. You should use the feedback on this paper to write an excellent tutorial paper.
- (3) **Tutorial (Written portion).** The tutorial is the main way in which courses are conducted in the UK. It's an ideal model for philosophy, since it integrates clarity of writing and discussion. In the written portion, I will give you a series of questions to answer in a paper of **no more than 1500 words**. The questions will be difficult and will require you to spend time thinking hard, re-reading parts of the text, and conferring with other students.
- (4) **Tutorial (Oral portion).** After you hand in your paper, I or one of the TAs will meet with each of you in small groups. We will discuss your papers in detail over about 45 minutes. This is an opportunity to elaborate and defend the things you say in the paper. Your performance in the tutorial will be graded independently of the quality of the paper.
- (5) **In class final examination.** This will be a fairly standard in-class exam.

What's Expected of You:

- I expect you to put a serious amount of effort into understanding the readings. They can be difficult for those new to philosophy, and you have to be persistent. This means more than simply reading them all the way through. You must do your best to understand them, engage them, and challenge them. Read slowly, with a pen in your hand to make notes as you go. Be sure to have read the assigned readings before you come to class. Read the section introductions if you're having trouble. Talk to your peers outside of class. Come to office hours and ask questions in class and section.
- I expect you to write your papers thoughtfully and come to exams and office hours well prepared. The best way to do this is to start early and talk things through with small groups of your fellow students outside of class. That said, I expect that all the work you turn in will be your own, i.e. not actually *written* collaboratively.
- I expect that you'll do your work honestly. We want to read your considered views about the material in your papers, not things that you've copied from others, and not simply a rehash of everything you got down into your notes. Plagiarism is trying to pass off other people's ideas and words as your own. I can't force you not to cheat, of course. Only you can make that decision, but remember that you are essentially defined by your actions. Cheating, even if you think you can justify it to yourself, makes you a cheater. What kind of a person do you want to be?
- I expect you to participate. "Participating" means showing up to lecture and section, and being actively engaged when you're there. It also includes asking questions in class when you have them, coming to see me or the TAs during office hours, or asking questions over email. Ask for help when you're confused. These issues are challenging and confusing. One must be persistent.

DATE	ASSIGNED READING (please read the indicated text(s) before lecture. "H" = Huemer text
T 3/29	Studying Knowledge and Introduction to the Theaetetus
R 3/31	Guest Lecture: Mr. Tim Jankowiak on "Theorizing about Knowledge and Justification" Handout "Epistemology: Theorizing about Knowledge and Justification"
T 4/4	"Man is the Measure of All Things" Reading: Theaetetus (142a-154a; 156c6-157c2; 157e-160e)
R 4/7	Skepticism I "Isn't there anything I can know for certain?" Reading: René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy" (H, 513-523)
T 4/12	Skepticism II "Could we be in the 'Matrix'?" Reading: Hilary Putnam, "Brains in a Vat" (H, 524-538)
R 4/14	Skepticism III: "Look at your hands..." Reading: G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World" (H, 602-605)
T 4/19	"Perception and Knowledge" Paper Assignment 1 Due Reading: Theaetetus (161c-162a; 163a7-168c; 177b5-179d2)
R 4/21	The Sources of Knowledge: Perception, Introspection, and Memory Reading: Bertrand Russell, "The Problems of Philosophy" (H, 64-73)
T 4/26	The Sources of Knowledge: Reason (Rationalism) Readings: Theaetetus (184b5-186e; optional: 192a-196c); Gotleib Leibniz, "Primary Truths" (posted on e-reserves)
R 4/28	The Sources of Knowledge: Reason (Empiricism) Reading: John Locke, "Essay Concerning Human Understanding," (H, 32-35)
T 5/3	Inductive Inference Reading: David Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," (H, 298-309)
R 5/5	Inductive Inference Tutorial Paper Due Reading: Nelson Goodman, "The New Riddle of Induction," (H, 320-331)
T 5/10	No Class: TUTORIALS
R 5/12	No Class: TUTORIALS
T 5/17	The Architecture of Knowledge (Foundationalism) Readings: Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy" (H, 515 [first para. of "First Meditation"], 518 [first para. of "Second Meditation"] Michael Huemner, "The Architecture of Knowledge" (H, 369-371) Sextus Empiricus, "The Five Modes" (H, 372-373)
R 5/19	The Architecture of Knowledge (Coherentism) Laurence BonJour, "The Structure of Empirical Knowledge" (H, 387-401)

T 5/24	“Knowledge is Justified True Belief” Readings: Theaetetus (200d5-210a); Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” (H, 444-446)
R 5/26	The Analysis of Knowledge: “Having a right to be sure.” Reading: A.J. Ayer, “Knowing as Having the Right to be Sure” (H, 440-442)
T 531	Naturalized Epistemology Reading: W.V.O. Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized” (posted on e-reserves)
R 6/2	Virtue Epistemology Readings: Theaetetus, (H, 145c9-146a6; 197a-199d) Linda Zagzebski, “Virtue Epistemology” (posted on e-reserves)
T 6/7	FINAL EXAM 8:00 AM - 10:50 AM. Please bring an unmarked blue book. That means don’t put your name on it or mark it up in any way in advance.

The Fine Print:

1. Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty. Using another person’s ideas in your own writing without citing them is plagiarism. For example, if you copy text from an internet site, even if you change the wording, and do not cite the source, you are plagiarizing. Failing to cite others when you use their ideas, even though you’ve put it in your own words, is like presenting them as your own. If you have any questions about what counts as fair use, please ask me or your TA. Academic dishonesty is turning in work that is not entirely your own. This may include plagiarizing, but it also includes letting others write parts of your papers for you or simply mooching off of the group you’re working with. Plagiarism and academic dishonest are morally wrong, illegal, and against the school’s honor code. When in doubt: cite it. The penalties for academic dishonesty are severe.

2. Computers in the Classroom. Some of you use computers to take notes. Some of you use your computers in class to look at Facebook, etc. Some of you do both. It’s super-distracting for people behind you if you are messing around on the internet while they’re trying to pay attention. So here are the rules for computers in the classroom: (1) Only use them for taking notes in a word-processing type program. (2) Whether you use them to take notes or not, sit in the back so that no one has to be behind you. This is a fail-safe. If you’re just taking notes you’ll be closer to the power outlets. If you’re such a hopeless wanton wreck that you can’t go an hour and twenty minutes without the internet, at least you’ll be sitting against the wall so that other people don’t have to be distracted by your lack of self-control.

3. Late Papers. Don’t turn in your papers late. It’s unfair to you and the instructors. It’s unfair to you because, chances are that working past the deadline will cut into other tasks you need to do and won’t really improve the assignment that much. It’s unfair to the instructors because it doesn’t give them as much time to respond to your work. If you are really in a bind, **please let us know BEFORE the due date**. If you do this, I will allow you to turn in the paper late with a 1/3 grade penalty per day past the deadline. If you do not do this, I will not accept it and you will receive no credit for the assignment.

4. Disabilities. Please let me know of any disabilities as soon as possible so that I can make whatever accommodations I need to.